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ABSTRACT

French teachers need to realize and convince their supervisors that more time must be given to development of acceptable pronunciation and comprehension skills in the initial stages of French language study. Phonetics offers the technique and tools for perfecting pronunciation. The method for college French instruction described is adapted from that used successfully to teach singers the correct pronunciation for a variety of languages. First, ear training is presented using 37 basic phonetic symbols drilled in sentences. A chart (appended) prepared for use at three undergraduate and graduate levels of French phonetics and diction is then distributed and elements of articulation are discussed. Errors are avoided best if pronunciation instruction begins with the first class. A variety of texts, intended for either language or vocal instruction and offering a variety of techniques, are available. (MSE)

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Phonetics, the Basis for All Levels of Proficiency In French Pronunciation

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Dr. Higgins' splendid remark in "My Fair Lady" was not so far off the mark when he said "The French don't care what they do, actually, so long as they pronounce it correctly." Most of us who have had first-hand experience in France, can bear witness to the truth of at least the latter half of this statement. Of all the languages and peoples in the world, the French seem to care most about the imperfect oral rendering of their beautiful language.

Proficiency in pronunciation demands of us as foreign language teachers our greatest effort; first, in mastering the skills ourselves, and, thereafter, in perfecting them constantly in order to pass them on with maximum fidelity to our fledglings, our foreign language majors and our graduate students. The most recent and justly emphasized goal of the language proficiency testing concept meets the special needs and demands of today's world and deserves our re-evaluation of oral-aural techniques.

Any one of the non-initiated, looking retrospectively at the kaleidoscope of our foreign language methods over the past half century, might well label us the most capricious of the teaching species. During the 1930's and 40's we translated and wrote French almost exclusively; during the 1950's we began to speak a bit, but only in single sentence/question responses, usually prepared in advance. In the 1960's we allowed the pendulum to go full swing to the all-direct method, which dealt with memorized dialogues and left our students helpless to use the language unless they could reproduce to the letter the scenario of one of their rote dialogues, such as: "l'agent de police devant l'opéra qui donne une amende à un américain en cadillac jaune" (hardly an everyday encounter). It took until the 1970's for us to realize that all the skills: reading, writing, speaking and comprehending could function effectively

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in no other way than through a team effort. All four skills had to progress at the same level. This is where we have been, or tried to be, until the idea of proficiency testing, now, in the mid-eighties, has encouraged us to give our students even greater oral-aural competency.

The emphasis upon communication skills had not really loomed up as a reality until the need presented itself. This has brought us through three major phases since the 1950's, from the World War II G.I., whose (usually unsuccessful) invitation of "Voulez-vous...?" to Sputnik's super-power spurt in the hope of catching up with the rest of the multilingual world, until, more recently, Senator Simon's chastizing and illuminating book, *The Tongue-tied American* (1980). Our present need is neither the G.I.'s quest for interpersonal communication, nor the defense of national prowess and pride, but, rather along with trying to know another culture and its civilization, to gain a financial edge in the ever-growing commercial realization that the world will not always revolve around the American dollar and that the successful salesman must speak the customer's language.

The serious flaw in the system to which we are now seemingly enslaved surfaces in our failure to realize that, of all of the skills, the oral-aural will demand three times the time for perfection than the other two combined. Nothing in our curriculum is geared to the absolutely essential and time-consuming coaching of these skills. We have a syllabus to follow; we must finish the text; we must get to the subjunctive by April. We undertake all this so that our students can make a good showing in regional or national contests, most of which are written exams where any oral-aural component measures at best the students' comprehension only. I also teach Latin, and I can recall the annual family joke at the Thanksgiving table, asking if I thought I would get Hannibal across the Alps by Christmas that year. Usually I did, but then, this is possible in Latin, a language where the emphasis is upon reading, translation, and interpretation. We French teachers need to realize and convince our supervisors that more time must be given in the initial stages of French study to the development of acceptable pronunciation and comprehension skills.

How shall we go about accomplishing this goal? How do we start, and when do we stop drilling the oral-aural skills? We start from day one and we never stop, not even at the graduate and post-doctoral levels. What is the technique and the tool which agurs best for perfecting pronunciation? Phonetic symbols! Yes, of all archaic sounding things, phonetic symbols. Our American students need ear

training before they try to say anything more than the most rudimentary sentences in French. They must be able to distinguish between "peur" and "deux" and in the nasal sounds between "tant" and "ton."

Ironically, it was my Lyric Diction class which convinced me of the validity of this phonetic initiation for teaching pronunciation. This special course, which is now required of all voice majors in our School of Music, is designed to teach voice majors the correct pronunciation for singing French, German, Italian, and Latin. Granted, the voice majors already have trained ears, but most of them have not a clue as to what they are saying in these languages. Theirs is the rigorous task of being able to reproduce these phonetic symbols across the four-language spectrum when they hear them spoken or sung, and to transcribe the varied orthographic combinations of these four languages into both oral sounds and phonetic symbols on sight. The amazing truth is that these students, once initiated into the special language of phonetic symbols, are able on a final examination not only to sing and comprehend the symbols but to pronounce very faithfully sight passages from all four languages according to the particular rules for singing in each. It was a revelation to me. If these students can master the pronunciation of four languages in one three-month quarter, surely our students with single emphasis should be able to master French pronunciation.

There is a chart that I have prepared (see Appendix) and use as the initial study for the three levels of French phonetics and diction I teach: a) Freshman-sophomore, b) junior-senior, and c) graduate. The difference is the time it takes for the aural-oral mastery of the chart: several weeks for the first group, one week for the second, and two days for the third. We, the students and I, then have a "secret-sound-language," where only the most frequent orthographic combinations listed on the chart are emphasized. It is when one gets into the different textbooks, which are clearly of three different levels, that the details and more obscure situations can be encountered, along with the ever-present lists of exceptions and snags for Anglo-Saxons. Before presenting the chart, however, the thirty-seven basic phonetic symbols thereon could be drilled in the six following sentences, or those of your choice, until the ear training has been thoroughly presented. Most of these sentences would actually appear in the first few lessons of an elementary textbook, but they could be introduced separately and memorized for content first, then, more especially, for ear training and for learning the comparable phonetic symbols for each sound. Thereafter the students should practice with words they do not know, in order to tune and verify their

oral perception. For each of the six sentences the phonetic transcription is given and comparable numbers for the underlined symbols as listed on the chart in the Appendix.

Figure 1.

Phonetic symbols and numbers in parentheses correspond to the chart in Appendix A.

1. A quelle heure va - t - il au travail?
   (a k ɛ l œ r v a t i l o travaj)
   (1, 27, 2, 34, 10, 35, 21, 5, 25, 4, 7, 30)

2. Comment allez - vous?
   (kɔmatalevu)
   (6, 36, 13, 3, 8)

3. C'est lui qui veut plus d'argent.
   (sɛlɥkivøplydarʒɑ̃)
   (18, 31, 9, 26 11, 24, 20)

4. Le champagne français est un bon vin blanc.
   (lə ʃɑ̃ paɲ frɑ̃sɛɛt œ̃ bɔ̃ vɛ̃ blɑ̃)
   (19, 32, 22, 16, 23, 14, 15)

5. Voici les chaises dans les garages de mon hôtel.
   (vwasileʃɛzdɑ̃legaraʒdəmɔ̃notɛl)
   (29, 17, 28, 12, 37)

6. Les haricots verts sont délicieux.
   (le harikovɛrsɔ̃delisjø)
   (33)

Once the students are able to pronounce and comprehend these six sentences, the chart could be distributed to them for thorough study. One can begin by emphasizing the only four consonants normally

pronounced in French at the end of a word, found in the word **CAREFUL.** Then one could show the students why we use a vowel triangle. By making the students aware of the gradual closing of both throat and lips on the closed vowels and opening of both for open vowels. This is a good way to make the students cognizant of the vocal and labial mechanisms involved. If one stresses the three consonants early on which Anglo-Saxons tend to nazalize, "l, r, m, and n" combining them with the various vowel sounds already learned, they gain additional practice. Students must be encouraged to pronounce the vowels which accompany these troublesome consonants perfectly and to release the vowel sound before pronouncing the consonant; if this can be accomplished during initial study, a thousand future errors could be avoided. One then does his/her best with the French "u," telling them to say "i" like "police" in the throat while rounding the lips to a tight whistle, or to pretend to be blowing out a candle, as Professor Bras suggests in her text *Your Guide to French Pronunciation.* This is also the time to give the students the simple rules for the mute "e," such as in initial, medial, and final syllables and the rule of two and three consonants; how not to "explode" on the consonants "b, d, t, and p"; along with the study of aspirate "h's"; these subjects are discussed thoroughly in Dr. Bras' text also. This system does work!

Through these prefactory remarks I am attempting to glean disciples from among French teachers at all levels who wish to perfect the student's pronunciation from the very first class. For my freshman-sophomore level, which would correspond to three or in some cases four years of high school study, I would recommend Professor Monique Bras' text, *Your Guide to French Pronunciation.* This is perhaps the finest book of its kind. The explanations are in English but all of the examples—some of the best I have ever seen—are written in French along with phonetic transcriptions. This text is published by Larousse and Company, Inc., 572 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York (ISBN-2-03-043101-X).

For my junior-senior class, I use *D'Accord* by Carduner and Hagiwara published by John Wiley and Sons. And for the graduate course, *Phonétique et diction françaises* by Marguerite Peyrollaz, Imprimerie Larousse. The lyric diction course has been based on John Moriarty's book, *Diction: Italian, Latin, French, German ... the Sounds and 81 Exercises for Singing Them,* E.C. Shirmer Music Company. I call Dr. Bras' technique (1) the "flèche" or "arrow" technique; the method in D'Accord (2), the "boîte" or "box" technique; Mme Peyrollaz'

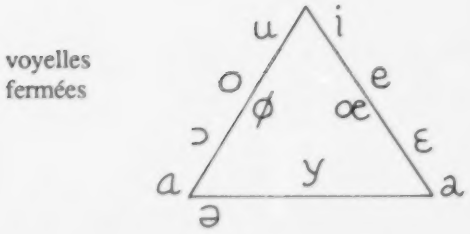
system (3) the "onde" or "wave" technique and Moriarty's use (4) as simply "phonetic comparison", since the musical scores dictate both stress and intonation patterns in these sentences.

When at last our potential French students have acquired an acceptable pronunciation, can comprehend a native speaker at a moderate rate of speaking, can write coherent and grammatically correct sentences and paragraphs all with equal facility, they have yet another dimension to add. They must learn that French scholars, businessmen, engineers, and civil servants alike will have had a thorough grounding in their own literature, civilization, and culture. And, furthermore, we must assure them that the French will not be "talking shop" at table or at parties but, rather, practicing a virtually lost talent in America, the art of conversation. If they wish to communicate on a comparable level, they, too, will need to have a knowledge of their own as well as French literature, civilization, and culture. The students who will succeed in our evermore-competitive and enlarging field of foreign languages will need first an excellent command of the basic four skills and then, thereafter, a fifth dimension of background knowledge and experience in the francophone world.

We, their teachers, must accept the difficult role of virtual miracle workers, and of role models as the embodiment of this five-phased gamut, in order to serve as the vehicle for our students' acquisition of such a multifaceted expertise as the French language, culture, and civilization.

Appendix

Les Symboles Phonétiques



Only Final Consonants Pronounced: C A R E F U L

I. Les Voyelles ouvertes:

	Symbole	Guide		L'Orthographe en Français et Exemples
1.	ɑ	"has"	a	(1st letter) [avec, assez]
			a	[la table]
			à	[voilà]
			e	(before "mm") [femme]
2.	ɛ	"met"	e	(in a syllable before a pronounced consonant) [belle]
			ê	[être]
			e	(in final et) [sonnet]
			è	[père]
			ei	
			ai	(except 1st person future and passé simple endings in "ai") [maison]

3. e .... "they" ..... é [été]
ai (in verb endings) [je ferai]
ez [allez]
er [aller]
"et" (the word *and*)
ed [sediment]

4. i .... "police" ..... ī [livre]
y [stylo]
î [île] *isle, hospital, forest, mast, août

II. Les Voyelles fermées:

5. a .... "father" ..... a (before final "ille") [paille]
a (before final "s") [pas]
a (before "z" sound) [gaz, base]
a (before "ss") [classe]
â [âme]
oi [moi]

6. ɔ .... "come" ..... o [homme, professeur, école, donner]

7. o .... "so" ..... ô [côte]
o (final letter) [véto]
o (before "z" sound) [rose, chose]
o (before final silent consonant)[canot]
au/aux [animaux]
eau/eaux [beaux]
aô [Saône]

8. u .... "soup" ..... ou [ou, où]
oû [goût]

9. ø .... "early" ..... eu (last sound in word) [deux]
eu (followed by "z" sound) [heureuse]

10. œ .... "learn" ..... eu (before a pronounced consonant) [leur]
oeu [boeuf]

11. ʏ .... u [une, bu, eut]

12. ə .... "th'boy" ..... e (without an accent mark at the end of a syllable) [1e, regarder, petit] ("e" muet)

III. Les Voyelles Nasales:

13. ɑ̃ .... aon [paon]
aen [Caen]
en [lente]
an [ans]
am [ambre]
em [temps]

14. ɔ̃ .... on [bon]
om [nombre]

15. ɛ̃ .... in [instant] *innocent, inimaginable
ain [main]
ein [peindre]
im [important] *immense, imitation
aim [faim]
eim [esseim]
en (after "i" in same syllable) [bien]

16. œ̃ .... um [parfum]
un [un]

IV. Les Consonnes Sifflantes:

17. z .... "tease" ..... s (between two vowels) [chaise]
z [gaz]

18. s .... "so" ..... s (except between two vowels) [sous]
ss [poisson]
ç [garçon]
c (before "e," "i," "y") [ceci, Nancy]

19. ʃ .... "wash" ..... ch [chien]

20. ʒ .... "mirage" ..... j [joli]
g (before "e," "i") [large, religion]

21. v .... "very" ..... v [vous]

22. f .... "fun" ..... f [fils]
ph [phrase]

V. Les Consonnes Explosives:

23. b (p) .... b [bas]

24. d .... d [devant]

25. t (d) .... t [tout]

26. p (b).... ..... p [pas]

27. k .... qu [qui]
k [kaki]
c (followed by "a," "o," "u") [concert, cancan, cuve]

28. ɡ .... "get" ..... g (followed by "a," "o," "u") [gaz, goût, fugue]

VI. Les Semi-Consonnes:

29. ɯ .... "wa" [watch]... oi [moi]
ou + vowel [oui]

30. j .... "y" [you]..... i (before a pronounced vowel) [question]
ll (after "i") [feuille, famille]
ill (after a vowel) [grenouille]
il (final after vowel) [vitrail, détail]
y (before pronounced vowel) [payer]

31. ɥ .... ui [bruit, huit]

32. ŋ .... "ni" [union].... gn [digne, campagne]

VII. Consonne supplementaire:

33. h .... h [aha]

34. l .... l [leur]

35. r .... r [rue]

36. m .... "more"..... m [moi]

37. n .... "note"..... n [non]

VIII. L'Alphabet Phonétique

Symboles	Exemples	Symboles	Exemples
:	allongement (sign of length)*	ŋ	digne
ɑ	patte	o	beau, notre
a	pas	ɔ	note
ɑ̃	tant	õ	bon
b	beau	œ	neuf
d	dame	œ̃	un
e	été	ø	peu
ɛ	près	r	drap
ɛ̃	pin	s	si
ə	le	ʃ	chou
f	fort	t	ta
g	gant, longue	u	tout
h	aha	y	tu
i	ici	ɥ	huile
j	hier	v	va
k	car, roc, que	w	oui
l	la	z	zone
m	mot	ʒ	je, rouge
n	ni	p	par

* : = allongement du son [première = prəmjɛ:r]